

# On Christian Love

An overview of Pope Benedict 16th's encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (God is Love), and in particular what it says about Christian service.

The encyclical begins by looking at what we mean by the word 'love'. It asks whether **eros** and **agape** - "worldly" love and love shaped by faith - are as separate as they might seem, or in fact aspects of the same thing. What is suggested in answer, is that one is incomplete without the other. On its own, **agape** would become "decisively cut off from the complex fabric of human life"<sup>1</sup>. Without **agape**, **eros** is "impoverished and even loses its own nature"<sup>1</sup>. What is required is a uniting of the two, a maturing and purification of **eros** ('passion' is perhaps the best English equivalent of **eros**) that increasingly seeks the happiness of the other person.

Yet one who gives must also receive. It is because God has first given, because God has first loved us, that we might do the same. God must be the source of this maturing of love. When the Christian lives and works in the service of charity, they must often return to the source of love in prayer.<sup>2</sup> Otherwise the hand will be empty and the service will be worthless. It is quite common for people to feel that time spent in prayer is time that could be better used doing something practical. Benedict addresses this thinking by referring us to the example of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta. For her, prayer was the inexhaustible source of the service she gave. It gave her the deep connection with God's love, which she then shared in her daily life.

When we consider the service of charity then, we must consider it in the context of love. Emphasising this, Benedict quotes Saint Paul from his first letter to the Corinthians. "If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing".<sup>3</sup> Why is this so? Surely if you give food to a hungry person it will fill them, regardless of any love that the giver may or may not have? The crucial perspective here is that we are dealing with human beings. As the encyclical points out, even when we have received all of the training we need to serve others in charity - and we must certainly receive that - we must combine it with love. Human beings always need something more than technically proper care. "They need humanity. They need heartfelt concern."<sup>4</sup> Put another way, we must see the people we serve with more than technically correct knowledge. We must become, like Jesus, "a heart that sees"<sup>4</sup>.

If we live in service of charity, and if we do so with love, we will be fulfilling the commandment to love God and love our neighbour. Benedict says that this is only possible because it is

more than a requirement. "Love can be 'commanded' because it has first been given."<sup>5</sup> We must come back to that point, because it is the key to understanding the great parables, particularly the parable of the Last Judgement. We have been loved first, therefore we can love our neighbour. This love of neighbour will, in turn lead us back to the encounter with God. God who will then say to us, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me."<sup>6</sup>

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1 Benedict XVI – 'On Christian Love' (2005) : 7

2 O.C.L. : 36

3 Saint Paul – 1 Corinthians Ch 13, vs 3

4 O.C.L. : 31

5 O.C.L. : 14

6 Matthew: Ch 25, vs 31-46